

Transcript: Voter Suppression

Archived Recording (John Lewis)

My dear friends, your vote is precious, almost sacred. It is the most the most powerful non-violent tool we have to create a more perfect union.

Courtney Jones Carney

That was a PBS Newshour clip of the late Georgia congressman and civil rights activist John Lewis speaking at the 2012 National Democratic Convention. 47 years earlier, Lewis led over 600 marchers across the Edmund Pettus bridge in Selma, Alabama. They were marching to Montgomery, the state capital, to demonstrate against voting suppression tactics, such as poll taxes and literacy tests, that stripped the right to vote from most Black Americans in the state. The marchers were met with such brutal violence by state troopers that the day of the march is known as “Bloody Sunday.”

Rosemary Ferreira

When Lewis spoke of voting as a “precious and almost sacred tool” he pointed to the sacrifice that many Black Americans endured to secure the right to vote for themselves and the generations to come after them. Unfortunately, more than 50 years after the march on Selma and the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, voter suppression tactics continue to systematically deny Black people and other historically marginalized groups of their right to vote.

Courtney Jones Carney

My name is Courtney Jones Carney.

Rosemary Ferreira

And I’m Rosemary Ferreira.

Courtney Jones Carney

And welcome to The Table podcast where we unpack questions regarding race, ethnicity, culture, norms, and current events.

Rosemary Ferreira

In today’s episode we will be peeling back the history of voting in the U.S. to expose the ways in which the country granted and denied the voting rights of particular groups. We will also hear from our guest, Mr. Nicholson, a Vietnam war veteran who grew up in Alabama during the 1960s. He will share his lived experience voting, and the obstacles he and many other Black Americans faced.

Courtney Jones Carney

In 1776, the founders of the United States declared that all men are created equal and are endowed with certain unalienable rights. But “men” was a subjective term. the original U.S. Constitution did not specify who could or could not vote – leaving it up to the states. Most states agreed to exclusively grant suffrage, or the right to vote, to white Christian men who owned property and were 21 years of age and older. These specific qualifiers shifted only

slightly in 1856 when landownership was removed as a requirement for voting, granting suffrage to all white men. It wasn't until 1868 when the 14th Amendment was adopted and formerly enslaved people were granted citizenship, that anyone besides white men could vote. However, gender was still a qualifier, so women were still left out of the mix. In 1870, the U.S. passed the 15th amendment which stated that federal and state governments could not deny the right to vote to people based on their race. While on paper, it looked like the government agreed that disenfranchisement based on race was wrong, the on-the-ground reality was much different. Some states figured out other legal ways to restrict Black people from voting, such as imposing a tax to cast a ballot or requiring literacy tests. Hey Rosemary, do you know how many bubbles are in a bar of soap?

Record scratch sound effect.

Rosemary Ferreira

Um, no? Like, 200? I don't know.

Courtney Jones Carney

Good try. But that's an impossible question, and that's one of many questions with no actual answer that were used to restrict Black people from voting. In the Reconstruction period many Black people were forced into poverty and denied access to education, limiting their ability to pay the tax and pass the tests. Many others faced scare tactics of being fired from their jobs if they tried to vote, and extreme threats of violence, and even lynching for exercising their right vote.

Rosemary Ferreira

During this same time period, the U.S. government was denying citizenship, and therefore the right to vote, to other racial groups as well. In 1876, the Supreme Court ruled that Indigenous people were not citizens and in 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act denied Chinese immigrants and their descendants the right to become naturalized citizens.

Another group that could not vote during this time? Women. Beginning in the mid-1800s a movement for women's suffrage began to form, collecting interest and support from both white and Black women. Although many white suffragists supported the abolishment of slavery, they began to distance themselves from Black liberation to pursue their own agenda. This split in the women's suffrage movement eventually gained support by white men who were afraid of Black people gaining political power. The women's suffrage movement specifically sought voting rights for white, upper-class, educated women because as white suffragist Belle Kearney stated, "the enfranchisement of women would insure immediate and durable white supremacy."

In 1920, the 19th Amendment would grant voting rights to women. As highlighted by Dr. Martha Jones in this clip entitled The History of Black Women and the 19th Amendment: Examining Racism Amongst Suffragettes from NBC News many Black women and men continued to face numerous barriers to exercise their right to vote. And in 1932 United States vs. Thind,

determined that people with ancestry from India were not considered White and therefore were ineligible for citizenship, thus barring them from voting. This court case was significant for many reasons, one being that it defined White as “to be interpreted in accordance with the understanding of the common man.” And of course, the common man was White.

Tired of being intimidated and attacked by white supremacists, Black people organized and took to the streets demanding the end to disenfranchisement as well as racial discrimination and segregation. This movement eventually led to the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which forbids states from enacting discriminatory laws that restrict people’s ability to vote, such as literacy tests and poll taxes. It also grants federal oversight on the voting process in states with a history of voter discrimination. This Act protected the right to vote not only for Black people, but for Native Americans who had been granted citizenship in 1924, and other People of Color.

Our guest Mr. Nicholson can provide a first-hand account of the obstacles Black people experienced trying to vote. Here he is first introducing himself:

Mr. Nicholson

I grew up in Mobile, Alabama and I was born in 1946 so I was pretty much in that era there. That’s my home, I was actually born in a place called Yellow Bluff, Alabama, but we moved to Mobile, Alabama so I was raised up in Mobile, Alabama. Went to school there and graduated in 1964, first graduating class of Trinity Gardens High School.

But at that particular time, the blacks in Alabama that was one of the key things, number 1 was education and number 2 was the importance of voting. And at that time we really didn’t know too much about what was going on at that time but we trying to vote but they had something what we called poll tax. Poll tax was a tax that you paid to the city or state and the goal was to, they realized that a lot of blacks didn’t have a lot of as they say good paying jobs at the time and if you couldn’t pay the poll tax then you weren’t allowed to vote. But they passed a law with that and we overcame that. Then there were little tests that they would give, a lot of blacks couldn’t read so they would allow them to mark X’s in there. But voting is very important, very important.

Rosemary Ferreira

Mr. Nicholson also shares a particular time he was barred from voting because the poll site claimed to have ran out of ballots.

Mr. Nicholson

One time, once, they claimed that... that’s when you had to write to vote, you mark it down on the paper and give it to them. They claimed they had ran out of voting paper. They claimed they ran out of ballots and things. Back then they hadn’t changed it to the machines. Then they started making it that you had to at least read your name, can you read this and ask you different questions, it was kind of illegal, but you know.

Rosemary Ferreira

Mr. Nicholson speaks to the context in which he grew up in Alabama.

Mr. Nicholson

Well remember then, they really went through a lot, they suffered a lot. Intimidation from the state troopers as well the police. You would go, they would show up, wouldn't do nothing, just being the presence of showing up, but I admired that they were determined in Alabama, especially two states that you're familiar with in history, Alabama and Mississippi and Alabama is right next door to Mississippi, but Alabama made the headlines of lynching and all of that other headlines, the four school kids that was killed in the church, that was bombed, things like that. All that stemmed from, and when Dr. King started coming through, voting. All stemmed from voting and doing what's right and I think, I'm making a statement from James Brown in a song, who said look for me, personally, integration is fine, good on one side, bad on the other side, but he said look, give me the same opportunities that you've had. This is where voting played a major role as well. Give me the same opportunity, if I fail then, it's my fault, but if I fail when you're not giving it to me and we live in America, that's your fault.

Rosemary Ferreira

Despite these barriers, Mr. Nicholson points to the solidarity that existed within the Black community to get to the polls and vote.

Mr. Nicholson

Yeah there's been a lot of progress, much better... naturally now, now you have more opportunities to do, there's no excuse for none of us. The people supported one another and they made sure you got there. I'm talking about the Black voters. If you couldn't make it, every one made sure you got to the polls to vote. Black voters, they looked out, c'mon you're coming.

Rosemary Ferreira

Fast forward to the 21st century, the progress made in the 1960s is steadily being retracted. In 2013, the Supreme Court weakened the Voting Rights Act by ending federal oversight of the voting process in states with a history of racial discrimination and disenfranchisement. Since this decision, states have shortened voting hours and days, enacted new barriers to voter registration, purged millions of eligible voters from the rolls, implemented strict voter identification laws, reshaped voting districts, and closed polling places.

While seemingly "race-neutral" at its surface, these changes have had deep impacts on Black and Brown voters. Stacey Abrams is an expert on voter suppression in the present-day United States. She was the first Black woman in the U.S. to be a major party's nominee for governor when she ran for the 2018 gubernatorial election in Georgia. After hearing that thousands of voters, most of whom were people of color, were unable to register and were turned away at the polls, Abrams spearheaded Fair Fight, an organization fighting against voter suppression in Georgia and across the country. In an interview with CBS This Morning, Abrams provides an example of voter suppression and its impact on communities of color.

Where there is oppression, there is always resistance. We saw in the heavily contentious 2020 presidential election cycle. Across the country, activists and community organizers like Stacey Abrams are fighting against voter suppression by mobilizing voters of color and advocating for election reform. Despite centuries of voter disenfranchisement in this country, the power of the people rises through. We see this punctuated by these final words from Mr. Nicholson:

Mr. Nicholson

Well it's just that the determination would stop you from, the police wouldn't bother you cause of the Civil rights issues and the laws that were passed. They just were there looking, to try to intimidate you and make you go back. But people at that time were determined, especially my mother and my father, I didn't realize they were so radical about that. I see that as I got older. They were very strong when they came to that, and they knew they were being mistreated but that still didn't stop them okay, they still did what was required of them, the law to vote. We realized that voting wasn't going to get no Black officers in at that time because even though we got a lot of Blacks to vote, it still took some of the whites doing right to get us in. All Black people don't put people in the office, all white people don't put in so it's just a combination of us working together. You're always gonna have evil in the world no matter how you look at it so you just take that and go with it and hope that they want to see good and treat all of us as human beings.

End Credits (Producer, Angela Jackson): The Table is a production of the Intercultural Center in the Division of Student Affairs at the University of Maryland Baltimore. It's hosted and produced and produced by Courtney Jones Carney. This episode was written by Rosemary Ferreira. The show's executive producer and editor is me, Angela Jackson, senior marketing specialist in the Division of Student Affairs. A big thank you to our guest, Mr. Nicholson, for sharing his story with us, and allowing us to share it with you. For more information about the Intercultural Center, including events where students can learn more about race, ethnicity, culture, norms, and current, visit umaryland.edu/ile. See you next time.